DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 100 157 FL 006 430

AUTHOR Swing, Elizabeth Sherman
TITLE Language and Identity in Belgium.
PUB DATE 23 Nov 73
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, November 23, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Biculturalism; *Bilingualism; Cultural Awareness; *Cultural Background; Cultural Pluralism; Dutch; French; *Identification (Psychological); Native Speakers; *Political Issues; Second Language Learning; *Second Languages; Sociolinguistics

ABSTRACT

Belgium is a bilingual country where upheavals are occurring after centuries of foreign-language domination. Flemish, the inherited language of northern Belgium, is rapidly gaining social, political, legal and educational equality with the French spoken for so long as the official language of the ruling class. The language of schools is determined by geographic locality as the Flemings' pride in their language strengthens and the country becomes more strongly linguistically divided. Strong French-Flemish antagonisms make language the major political issue in Belgium today. (CK)

ED100157

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY IN BELGIUM

Elizabeth Sherman Swing

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Internationalization and Teaching English

Focus Group

Convention of the National Council of

Teachers of English

Philadelphia, Pa.

November 23, 1973

FL006430

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Return address:
614 Hillborn Avenue
Swarthmore, Pa. 19081

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Language and Identity in Belgium

Belgium is a particularly interesting case-study locale for those interested in the internationalization of English. On the one hand, it is a major commercial and diplomatic center where English plays a role similar to that which Latin once did -- if not a universal language, then certainly a powerful force for international unity. On the other hand, this fact has no relationship at all to Belgium's own language crisis and illustrates that acquisition of an international language as an act of free will by a privileged group does not in any way solve the problems of identity related to the use of the Mother tongue.

We are deluding ourselves if we view the new international role of English as anything more than an accommodation to business and diplomatic exigencies. The Mother tongue continues and will continue to provide the metaphysical basis of identity for all of us, a fact that is fully understood by people who have almost lost a Mother tongue because those in power have valued an international language over the immediate local means of communication, as the French-speaking ruling clique did in Belgium for so long. For victims of such deprivation, such as the Flemings in northern Belgium, who speak a variant of Dutch, language -- their own language -- comes to have near mystical qualities. As the Flemish Cultural Council recently said:

> From a means of communication the language grows into a creative spiritual force. Language lends the culture of a people its identity and its forms.[1]

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Granted, we in America are more sensitive today to the implications of linguistic identity -- as witness our current concern with bilingualism and bidialectism whereas only a few years ago we considered it our duty to sacrifice the linguistic heritage of the children of immigrants to what we perceived as the fabric holding a heterogeneous society together, unilingual American English -- but we have just begun to understand the meaning of the Mothen tongue and its relationship to metaphysical as well as political crises.

The violence of the language controversy in Belgium is likely to surprise -- actual violence, rioting in the streets, as well as intemperate opinions and attitudes. In 1968 Louvain rivaled Columbia and Berkeley as a center for radical student activism, and riots between French-speaking and Flemish students had more lasting political impact than Mark Rudd will ever know about. The government fell, the French faculty agreed to move to Wallonia; but, of course, both outcomes were already implicit in the historical structure of the controversy, a structure that goes far beyond the immediate issues of time and place. For language is the major political issue in Belgium and has been for centuries -- at least it is according to the to the revisionist school of historians, those influenced by the Flemish nationalists who see the language controversy leading inevitably to the present multinational state, a federation of linguistic communities instead of the nation-state conceived by the nineteenth century framers of the Belgian constitution. For the revisionists the evolution into separate but equal linguistic and cultural regions is the predetermined solution to the controversy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The practical manifestations of this evolution are everywhere: street signs in French and Flemish in bilingual Brussels, unilingual street signs elsewhere -- French in Wallonia, Flemish in Flanders; two television channels, one French, one Flemish; two radio stations, one French, one Flemish; two Cultural Councils, one French, one Flemish; two sets of directors for the Royal Academy of Science, one French, one Flemish; two orchestras at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Brussels, one French, one Flemish; and, of course, two Ministers of National Education, one French, one Flemish, each administering a complete network of schools in his particular linguistic community. Even in bilingual Brussels the schools belong to one linguistic community or the other, the only concession to bilingualism being the legal requirement that the second language be taught in elementary school, but as a second language. In the rest of the country instruction is carried on only in the language of the region -- Flemish in Flanders, French in Wallonia -- and the language of the rival linguistic camp vies with other languages (with English, for example) as the primary second language, although as a practical matter no one could make a public career in Belgium today without knowing both French and Flemish.

Such a necessity has not always been the case. Flemish was not declared the second national language of Belgium until 1898 -- this in spite of the fact that a majority of people in the area that was to become Belgium have not spoken any other language since the fifth century A. D. when the Franks overran this outpost of the Roman Empire and imposed their Germanic tongue on Flanders.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Flanders has, of course, the memory of a golden age during the Renaissance when it was a major intellectual center, but later history, particularly nineteenth century history, is the history of a subjugated people, subjugated that is, to a linguistic imperialism. For, with the exception of the fifteen years when Holland ruled Belgium and established a network of Dutch schools, Flanders was ruled by people who spoke a different language: by Napoleon early in the century, by its own French-speaking country later -- countrymen, by the way, whose purpose was to forge the identity of a new nation, a French language identity which reflected their class and their international outlook. These French-speaking Belgians viewed Flemish as a local patois, the language of the lower classes destined to disappear in a generation. Meanwhile, the judicial system, the administration of government, the army, the schools were all conducted in French was even the language of instruction for the occasional course in Flemish French. At least the attempt was made to conduct all schools in French--an experiment in using French to train industrial workers was soon abandoned in Ghent when it became apparant that the students did not understand the instruction.

In reality Flemish elementary schools managed to exist in Flanders side by side with the French-language schools for children of the international mercantile community, but the secondary schools and the universities were wholly French language preserves -- and continued to be until the early 1930's when Ghent became officially a Flemish university. Thus, the only way Flemings could get the training requisite for joining the establishment was to become a product of its educational system.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

But if they did so, Flemings entered a highly competitive academic milieu with an initial disadvantage which they frequently could not overcome. They tended to do less well on the concours general, which was conducted wholly in French, a showing which a school director in 1901 blamed on the difficulty of learning cognitive subjects in a language imperfectly understood. "The pupils are somewhat confused with the two languages, and there is a great mental effort in changing from one language to another."[2] Other writers have pointed to the "low intellectual life of the frenchified Flemings"[3] and to the fact that it might take a family two generations or more to adopt French language and customs -- and that the process of doing so meant forging a new identity.

One of the problems in forging this identity was the difficulty of feeling pride in the linguistic base from which they, as Flemings started. Flemish had been cut off from its intellectual roots. No Belgian university center of Flemish existed, and the language spoken by the majority of Flemings tended to fragment into local dialects, a victim [redacted] of the [redacted] aspirations of its own people who had learned from their daily life that only French had value. As one commentator noted, the Flemish language tended to be not only "neglected but despised," and one rarely could find an "intellectual who speaks Netherlandish well. The vulgar cast it off and despise it without knowing it. . . . Never is any attention paid our language by the public authorities."[4]

The reality of today is, of course, very different -- as we have noted -- the greatest difference being a new pride in language. Try speaking French in Flanders today and see what happens! If you don't speak Flemish, you will be answered in English or German if you are answered

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

at all. The Flemish language itself reflects both a particularism, refusing to use French borrowings long ago assimilated into Dutch, and recognition of the need for unified standards. The proximity of the Netherlands with its radio and television have helped to form an image of a central language, but the sense of unity with Dutch is also a legacy of history and of the sense of history promulgated by the Pan-Netherlandish Movement. At any rate, the official language of the Flemings is now called Dutch, Where once there was a swarm of almost mutually incomprehensible spoken dialects, the goal now is to speak and write cultivated Dutch.

The new realities have other manifestations, too, some of them very much like obverse images of the past. Since the new language laws tie the language of instruction in the schools to the language of the geographical and cultural community, a new issue has arisen for the French-speaking Belgians living in Flanders. Both the French language transmutation classes and the private schools, which existed in the past as a way of providing instruction in the French language for children of francophones, have disappeared; and even if they could continue to exist, their diplomas would not have legal status and would not admit To universities graduates of schools other than those of the language of the region -- whatever the language of the university. These Walloon parents now live with the uncomfortable realization that <u>their</u> childfen must cope with learning in an unfamiliar language. In an unsuccessful appeal to the Court of Human Rights at Strasbourg, these parents argued:

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

7

> Our children . . . are being obliged to receive ideas by ear, especially abstract ideas -- such as those of mathemtics, religion, ethics, physics, and chemistry -- in a language they understand only with difficulty, or even initially not at all, . . . and they cannot fully exercise their intellectual function of reflection.[5]

The wheel of fortune has turned.

In the bilingual area, Brussels and its adjacent communes, the language of the home determines which school the child will attend, and parents are subject to visits from language inspectors. In principle the choice of school is the father's (liberte du pere de famille), a principle that is subject to strict interpretation. In one celebrated case a French speaking five-year old whose Flemish father had not lived with his Walloon mother for years was declared ineligible for a French languge education -- a curious mutation of the concept of the Mother tongue since the mother does not speak Flemish.[6] In other instances children of Americans living in Brussels have been transferred from French to Flemish schools on the argument that both English and Flemish have a teutonic base. The new power structure has not solved the problems of identity for everyone.

But it has brought a new world to many Belgians. In 1957-58 Flemings represented only 38% of the university enrollment; in 1966-67 they represented 44%[7] -- an enrollment that is still not a reflection of their numerical superiority, but the trend is clear. And anyone who has recently lived in Belgium can testify

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

to the sense of purpose behind these statistics, whether it be innovations in the curriculum of theConservatory of Music at Antwerp or a decision to fill in non-French language lacunae in the musicological collection of the Royal Library in Brussels or whether it be an extraordinary outpouring of scholarly publications in Flemish. The day is nearly over when the cliché, "Les hommes distingué parlent le francais," has significant meaning in Belgium as a source of reproach to Flemish Belgians. But the fact that attitudes of snobbishness on the one hand and self depreciation on the other could ever have existed because of the accident of early linguistic nurture, because of the accident of the Mother tongue, is testimony to the delicate balance between language—as the composite of what we say, hear, write, read, and think—and the image we have of ourselves. As teachers we have an obligation to respect the linguistic image that gives identity to others at the same time that we realize the values of the cultural heritage that we are transmitting in English.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

From The Revision of the Constitution 1967-71, Memo From Belgium, Nos 144-145-146 (January-February-March 1972) p. 22.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

FOOTNOTES

[1]M. van Haegendoren, The Flemish Movement in Belgium, translated from the Dutch (Antwerp: Flemish Cultural Council, 1965) p. 34.

[2]R. R. Dawes, Bilingual Teaching in Belgian Schools (Cambridge University Press, 19-2), pp. 49-50.

[3]Haegendoren, p. 13.

[4]Shepard Clough, A History of the Flemish Movement in Belgium (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1930), p. 17.

[5]Publications of the European Court of Human Rights, Case "Relating to Certain Aspects of the Laws on the Use of Language in Education in Belgium," I (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1967) p. 29.

[6]"Liberté du père de famille à Rhode-Saint-Genèse," Le Soir (Bruxelles), 2 fevrier 1971, p. 3.

[7]Annuaire statistique de la Belgique. Institut National de Statistique, Tome 90 (1970), p. 33.

Elizabeth Sherman Swing,
"Language and Identity in Belgium"
Internationalization and Teaching English-Focus Group
Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, November 23, 1973